

It's Just "Busy Food"

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Horses have been a very important part of man's life for centuries. Horses were important to those that fought wars in the medieval times. Horses were very important to our ancestors as they developed this country in getting work done and for transportation. Horses are been an important part of our recreational life.

The great majority of the time, the horse has been a grazing animal. They have relied on their ability to roam and access different types of forages to meet their nutritional needs. Because the horse is a herbivore, they have relied on forages and their need to consume forages almost on an hourly basis. While in their natural environment, the horse would consume forages as a complete structure, leaves and stems.

The benefit the horse has brought to man has lead people to confine their important horses in an effort to improve their abilities. This confinement has led to less nutritional choices for the horse. It has led to less ability to roam. The result is the horse is confined to wood, metal, concrete and whatever food man chooses to present to them with little or no exercise.

It was determined that horses that were asked to do hard work would benefit from the feeding of higher energy grains rather than just forages. In recent years, our horses have been fed small square bales of hay that was generally made to be fed to dairy animals. This was a very good source of forages and was a benefit to the horse fed in confinement. The dairy farmer raised and harvested these small square bales to feed to their dairy cows with the expectation of getting milk to sell or feed their families.

Today, the horse is relying on an owner that has been long removed from production agriculture. The horse owner is relying on outside sources for nutritional information. The feed salesman has been selling the grain portion of the horse's diet. The source of hay has not been sold as well. The traditional feed salesman has tried to meet the nutritional needs of the horse by feeding it in the form of grains and supplements. I was told as a practicing veterinarian that the hay was just busy food to keep the horse from being bored between the feeding of meals of grain. There was no perceived nutritional benefit from the forages.

The dairy farmer raising and harvesting small square bales is almost gone from the scene. Instead of high quality forages for dairy cows, horse owners are now turning to other sources of forages. Road ditches ("road kill hay"), CRP acres and wetlands, not suitable for row crop production, are now the new source of forages for today's horse. The significant increase in the profits of raising grain for other uses has made most good farm land unaffordable to be used to raise forages for the horse. The benefits of government farm programs directed to grain production, in addition to the increased value of grain, has caused the traditional forages acres to be tilled in favor of grain production.

The quality of these other sources of forages, in addition to the poorer harvesting practices, has lead the horse to forages that are today referred to as just busy food with little or no nutritional value. Most of these forages are harvested with no concern as to the nutrition in the bales.

These low quality forages are also not feed with the intent of maximizing the nutritional benefits. Leaves of forages contain the greatest portion of the nutrients. When leaves are lost to the wind, manure, dirt, sawdust and poor harvesting techniques, the horse is left with stems or cellulose. This lead to the term "busy food."

Forages are an absolute must for a healthy and productive horse. The horse evolved eating forages and not grains. The horse in their natural environment would eat a balanced diet of leaves and stems.

The trends in forages for the equine industry have reached the lowest level in centuries. Never, in the evolution of the horse, has the horse experienced such poor nutrition as they have today. Today's weedy pastures are a better source of nutrition than most of the forages that are raised and harvested for the horse.

Today's horse is in the same place that our cats and dogs were 50 years ago. Cats and dogs also were confined by man to a very limited area. They were limited to table scraps for nutrition. Many of those cats and dogs experienced nutritional diseases. Today's balanced science based diets have almost eliminated those nutritional diseases.

Today's horse has reached the same low that our cats and dogs reached 50 years ago. Today's horse is on a diet of table scraps experiencing nutritional diseases that can be corrected with a balanced science based diet. The knowledge is there to produce the good nutrition that can lead to a healthier horse.